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## BACK IN BRITTANY

BY ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

HERE he was back in France—back in Paris, and idling pleasantly at one of those sidewalk cafés where you can sit all day and watch the world stream by.

When he sailed from home, it had been in his mind that he would make this trip something of a pilgrimage, that he would tramp once more along the La Ferté road where first he had watched the Marines going in, find again the Maxfield Parrish forest where the tattered but triumphant infantry fell back for breath after the smash under Soissons, pay an humble visit to the old friend and great priest who kept the faith during the long ordeal of St. Mihiel, nor turn back (as once another half-hearted runaway had done) at Varennes, but push on to explore the new life at each crest and ravine of the Argonne he knew so well.

Above all, he would seek out Savenay, that little Brittany village where he had been stationed for so many months that the very silhouette of its gaunt cathedral and the very color and lullaby sleepiness of its slow-revolving windmills would make a fond reunion. All these things it had been in his mind to do. Yet his two months' stay in France was almost spent and he had done none of them—or done few of them, and that cursorily.

Why? he wondered. Something was missing. What? He, at least, was not one of those varnished tourists who seemingly had expected each group of Frenchmen to welcome them wildly as the first troops of 1917 were welcomed, and so, perforce, went home in sulks. Served them right. But something *was* missing. Perhaps if a finer use had been made of the victory the unquestioning troops had forged, the old scenes of their sacrifice would have called him now more urgently. Maybe his was a mere nostalgia for the lost companionship, a feeling that he

could not make the old hikes alone, nor with uncomprehending strangers. Not that a reluctance to leave the Café Napolitan needs, *per se*, a subtle explanation.

And yet—well, it *was* an uncomfortable thought that all his happy anticipations, all his eager expectations, all the rendez-vous he had made during the fighting, were to be dropped as the mere phantoms of a passing mood; so easily dispelled, so soon forgotten. Surely there must be some continuity, some stamina to his fond desires. One thing he could still do. One thing he need not weakly forfeit to the inertia of the moment. One thing he might carry out to forestall all subsequent regrets. He would at least go back to Savenay.

There was no time to lose. Another week would find him calculating, with furrowed brow, in shillings instead of francs. Another fortnight and he would be toiling up the gangplank at Southampton, tired and homeward bound. If he were going to Savenay, he must start next morning.

So the next morning—it was a Sunday—found him on the platform of the Gare d'Orsay at the incredible hour of seven, armed with a ticket that had cost him about seven times the price he paid when he was one of several million infrequently appreciative public charges. Soon he was tucked in his compartment, a section filled to the brim with bags and bundles and bourgeoisie. It was a sweltering day, yet he knew from their expressions, from the very shape and quality of their luggage, that it would be idle to suggest that the window be opened even a little way.

Air-tight, hot, crowded, grimy—and Savenay ten hours away. Why, in the name of commonsense, had he ever quit Paris? What, in the name of human nature, did he expect these lean Bretons to say to him? Most of them would not remember him at all. And why should they? Old Madame Richard, who had thrashed the life out of his weekly shirt at the village *lavoir*; old Madame Lefevre, whose booming voice had always been raised in the proud boast that she never used grease in cooking; scornful little Clare, who had served chocolate in the *patisserie* for the insatiable Americans and had developed there the colorable conviction that they were a species of chocolate soldier—they might

remember him. But what of it? Would anyone be glad to see him?

Madame Cocaud, perhaps. Yes, Madame Cocaud, if she were still alive. And, as he drowsed off, his memories staged once more the smoky old buvette, hung with festoons of sausages and with copper kettles innumerable. There, since her widowhood, had Madame Cocaud served the drinks when once a week market day would bring a strange pageant of Breton folk to Savenay and transform the gray square of the *Mairie* into a chattering, fluttering county fair. There, since the black morning when the Government reported tersely and with mimeographed sympathy that her son had been killed at the front, she had dwelt alone, a sleepless and a haunted woman. The neighbors shook their heads, and vowed that poor Mother Cocaud's mind was affected, and avoided her. Then one scorching day in 1917, an American had clattered up to the buvette, put his head in the door, and roared for food. She protested that hers was no restaurant, and he started to go, but, obeying some sudden impulse, she beckoned him back, put a few fresh twigs on the open fire, and bent over a pan that soon produced a supper of extraordinary savor. It was eaten with gusto and was watched over from the shadow of the kitchen by an old woman who, now and again, would lift her apron to her eyes.

That was the beginning of an unofficial American mess which was crowded to suffocation morning, noon and night for two years, until the last boatload of the A. E. F. shoved off for home. Somehow, Madame Cocaud knew that in feeding these young strangers she would find peace,—knew, in a way which satisfied something within her, that, in comforting and cheering them, she would be pleasing her lost son.

What plates of *crêpes*, what pans of Breton sausage, what jars of jam, what cellars of wine vanished in those two years! Which of the boys paid, and how many sneaked away without paying anything, she never knew. She asked only that there be enough funds to keep the supplies moving. She charged so little and her price scale was so sketchy. You would gorge yourself for hours and clamor for your check only to be waved aside and told to come back another time and settle when she was less busy.

If you protested with mock solemnity that you might never come back, she would make a transparent pretense of figuring on a morsel of paper and then, with a comically unsuccessful effort to look severe and commercial, she would emerge with some such absurd charge as three francs.

This utter failure on her part to appreciate the financial opportunities offered by the passing of the crusaders was a source of considerable bewilderment and no little annoyance to her neighbors. They pointed out to her that in time the Americans would be gone, that then the ancient quiet would fall on the village, and that she would have no fortune put away for the after years. "On whom would I spend it?" asked Madame Cocaud.

The pilgrim would not soon forget that look which used to come into her face when the soldiers ordered to the front came in to kiss her goodbye. Madame Cocaud had a thousand sons in the war. Surely she would remember the least of them, would have a welcome for the meanest of her subjects.

He was thinking of her now and smiling as the train pulled in to Savenay.

It was strange to see the station, once so alive with jostling troops, now quiet and empty. A few folk straggled from the train across the fields. The hillroad to the village square stretched hot and white and steep before him. As he plodded up, he wished devoutly that he had not come. Only one trace of the A. E. F., that was, greeted him as he climbed. It was a little pointing sign which read: "To the American Cemetery."

He dropped his bag at the Hotel of the Green Oak, laid claim to a six-franc room for the night (he wanted to leave on the next train but it would be pusillanimous not to stay till morning) and walked out towards what had been the American hospital.

Here and there along the road, a shopkeeper came out and saluted him cordially but vaguely. It was interesting to find young folk in the street, knots of loitering Willie Baxters as you might find them in any Gopher Prairie of a Sunday afternoon. There had been none in the old days, but now the war was over.

The hospital was gone. The ruddy slanting sunlight fell across the fields where acres of tents and barracks had stood, all of them gone now, even the theatre that was built with such

energy by its prospective patrons. Still standing, however, was the stone school-house which had been its nucleus, now a school once more, with all the luxurious American plumbing piously torn out and scrapped lest the young idea be softened by too much new-fangled comfort.

There, in a quondam squad-room, where he himself remembered sleeping for a time, there were traces of school-work, scrawled blackboards and all the débris of a class in Molière. At least the bits of paper left lying on the desks indicated that the teacher had been lecturing (tepidly, perhaps) on the sins of *L'Avare*. With something of a start, he discovered that the notes had been taken on the back of old American court-martial papers. On the piece he held in his hand, he read the fragment of an indictment which accused (doubtless with justice) one he had known of having gone A. W. O. L.

Here was reconstruction with a vengeance. There was in it something of the lilt of the rhythm of history. He had felt its thrill before, once when he saw German prisoners filling in the trenches around Rheims, again a year later when he had heard the machines threshing in the wheat at Belleau Wood, and only just the other day when, high in the French Alps, at the blazing, blinding electrical forges of Ugines, he had seen the armored turrets of crippled tanks and the rusty cases of a million shells being melted and recast into the tools and machinery of peace.

It was getting late. As he started down the road leading back into the town, he could see ahead of him on the right the jaunty sign of the *patisserie*. He vividly remembered how great was the quantity and variety of cakes it had been possible to wash down with chocolate or *vin ordinaire* during the hour before taps—such variety and such delicacy as no trays of French pastry ever evinced in America. Once he had tried to explore the low-ceilinged kitchen where they were fashioned, only to have the scandalized *patronne* drag him hastily from the threshold. Why, even she dared not cross it. She might employ a famous Breton pastry cook, but by a law of his guild as old and as strong as Chartres Cathedral, she might not get near enough to him to learn the secrets of his art.

The now cheering pilgrim remembered, too, one drizzling night

in the late summer of '17, when the newly arrived Americans found the young *patronne* weeping helplessly over her two-weeks old son. Her husband was at the front, there were no doctors within many miles, and she was left alone and frightened with a baby whom a clumsy and stupid midwife had blinded at birth. He remembered how the puzzled Americans had carried her off hopefully to where a famous American surgeon, destined for big work in France, was billeted while his orders loitered, how, in two weeks, her boy could see as well as you, and how always thereafter the Americans had a staunch friend at the *patisserie*—that, too, he remembered.

That is why he was sure now that she would be glad to see any of the old crowd. And he was not mistaken. It was not long before the pilgrim was seated in the shop, with the greatly-expanded youngster on one knee and a plate of pastry on the other, while Madame poured steadily from a dusty bottle of Madeira and showered him with questions as to the whereabouts and health of the doctor who had given back her boy's eyes—beautiful eyes, now, and as big as saucers.

She was somewhat taken back when her guest, in his decadent civilian state, paused far short of the eighteen cakes she had recalled as his wartime record. He protested that he must save some room for one of Madame Cocaud's dinners.

"Oh, I am glad you are going there," the little *patronne* assented eagerly. "She is so lonely now. It has been hard for her these days, when all the boys that had been his schoolmates and companions, have come rattling home from the war. To sit alone in your shop and hear the shouts and the laughter when your neighbor's son comes home—that is not easy." There was the ghost of a fear in her eyes as she reached then for her own boy and smoothed out the tousle of his hair.

When, a few moments later, he stood at the threshold of Madame Cocaud's shop, he knew he had come to the end of his little journey. It was a heart-warming reunion, in which one white coif became sadly disarranged. She wanted to ask after twenty men at once and, at the same time, she felt she must begin cooking for the one at hand without loss of time. Almost instinctively, as she rattled on, her hand reached for her frying

pan. She did not ask him what he wanted. She knew and set to work contentedly on a mess of *crêpes et saucisses*. She laid no place for him in the gloomy outer room, but cleared his old one at the little table in the kitchen corner, so near the hearth that it was never outside her range as a juggler to flip her cakes from the fire to the table.

A strange and unfamiliar maid hovered on the outskirts of these proceedings. What had become of the old one, the shy, quiet girl who would never engage even in the mildest banter with the hurrying Americans, nor appear with the other natives at the occasional band concert at the hospital? Once Madame Cocard had tried to beguile her to such a concert, which she herself was dreading because she knew she would be overcome (as, indeed, she was) when they reached the Marseillaise. But the girl had been too afraid of some criticism from the family of her betrothed, who was at the front and might hear that she was gadding about with the Americans.

"And did the boy come back?"

"Oh yes," said Madame Cocard, "he came back. But, after she had waited five years for him, he married someone else."

This seemed very tragic.

"And the girl, did it hurt her deeply? Was she—"

"Oh, yes, she was inconsolable, quite inconsolable."

"Did she—did she—" he trailed off apprehensively.

"Oh, yes," said Madame Cocard cheerfully, "she married someone else, too."

Then, as the coffee came on, and a great medley of liqueurs from all manner of strange, squat bottles, she delved into her desk and emerged with an armful of letters and Christmas cards and postals, all from America, a curious assortment of penmanship, from the nice chirography of some remote librarian to the painfully achieved superscription by one infrequently given to the habit of writing. They were all affectionate greetings from her lost Americans, some in earnest French, some in English, some in a fantastic blending of the two. She did not know how to answer them, did not know, indeed, from whom any of them had come. She could only keep them in her desk to be taken out from time to time and held in her lap. The two spent an



hour trying to identify the senders. He suggested lightly that she take a page advertisement in an American magazine to acknowledge them, and he had to devote considerable energy to dissuading her from the notion.

"And here," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "here is something that came yesterday."

So saying, she unfurled a deal of paper and string and brandished therefrom a formidable carving set, which had spent six months seeping through the *douane*. An inclosed card identified the gift as coming from one who had been a private in the A. E. F. and who was now resident in Newark, N. J. She shook her head helplessly, for it is not by names that she remembers them all.

"I think I know who he is," she confided in a whisper, as though it seemed hardly fair to let the old walls know. "It's a boy who borrowed my carving knife one night and lost it."

They carried the stack of American mail back to the rickety *escritoire* and stuffed it away. There were two other bursting cubbyholes alongside. He pointed questioningly to the first of them.

"They are all the letters about my son," she explained, eyeing them askance. "Letters from the Government, from monument-makers, from dealers in *deuil*, from the school where he studied, from the university where he lectured, from the people in London with whom he stayed when he lectured there. He was a lecturer on peace, Monsieur. *Quelle ironie!*—The letters are all here. See, I have never opened them."

And she darted a frightened look at him, as though she feared he would propose their being opened and read at once. He shifted hastily to the other collection.

"And these?"

Whereat she chuckled gleefully and her kindly face—it is the kindest face in all the world—wrinkled with the quizzical amusement of her famous smile. The A. E. F. justified its existence when, even for a little time, it brought back Madame Cocaud's smile.

"Those," she announced, "are all the letters and threats and warnings from the tax-office, inquiring about my excess profits during the war. They've heard somewhere—we all have neigh-

bors—that for two years this was a tremendous restaurant. And now they want a part of the loot. I told them I made no money from the Americans. But what tax-collector would ever believe that? They’ve asked me now to make out a statement of receipts and disbursements for each day of the war.”

And Madame Cocaud, who had often collected only from those who pursued her with insistence that she charge them something, laughed till her white coif shook. But what had she said in reply? Why, she had suggested to the tax-collector that, if he was in such desperate straits, he might go to the war-office and draw the insolent, impious money which was her legal due because her son had been killed for France. For herself, she would never touch a sou of it.

The thought of Madame Cocaud being harried as a profiteer was too much for the visitor. As he uprooted himself at midnight, he asked for his bill. “Oh, you’ll be here for breakfast,” said she, up to her old tricks. So after breakfast next morning—a very toureen of coffee, and such coffee!—he asked again. “But you will be here for lunch,” she suggested, with a baffled look in her eyes. No—see: here was his bag all packed. He was going straight from her door to the cemetery, and then, cutting across the fields, he would catch the morning train back to Paris.

“Ah, then,” she said, “I must say goodbye. I couldn’t be happy if you went away thinking of this as a tavern where you paid like some stranger. This is your home in Brittany.”

So she kissed him on both cheeks, and the memory of her standing in the doorway, to watch him as he crossed the square, was with him an hour later as he clambered aboard the Paris train, preëmpted a vacant compartment, opened the windows wide, put his feet up, covered his face with a copy of *Le Phare*, and settled back to drowse his way to the Gare-D’Orsay, while the thump and rattle of the wheels took up a refrain which seemed to say: “Glad-you-came, glad-you-came, glad-you-came.” There were overtones, too. Over and above the rhythm, there broke clear and satisfying and curiously sad the sound of a page turning in the history of his life.

ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT.